CHAPTER 4

IMPOSED OPPRESSION
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4.1. Introduction: Defining Oppression

Oppression can be defined as the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful group whether it is forced or intentional or either. Oppression need not be a state concept but a dynamic and relational one. It is not defined in terms of situations of simple frustrations, restrictions or limits, it occurs when people are blocked from opportunities to advance their development, are excluded from full participation in society and assigned a second class or lower level citizenship in society merely due to their group membership characteristics like caste, race, gender, economy etc. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (829) for instance, defines the term oppression as: “… unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power … something that oppresses especially in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power …. A sense of being weighed down in body or mind.” According to Frye, oppression comes from the root ‘press’, which means:

To be caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the things in motion or mobility (Frye 2).

Such a dehumanizing society engenders a hegemonic or colonial situation, sustains it through excessively violent means, destroys the victims both physically and psychologically and finally leaves him in a pathetic state of powerlessness and psychic impotency. Young, in her influential text Justice and the Politics of Difference outlines (42) five forms of oppression:
1. Exploitation - a social process in which the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups.

2. Marginalization - the exclusion of groups in society from useful and meaningful participation of society.

3. Powerlessness - inhibiting the development of the capacities of groups in society, explosive to disrespectful behaviour due to group status and a lack of decision making power in one’s working life.

4. Cultural Imperialism - in which the dominant group universalizes its experiences and culture and places itself as the norm, according to which other groups should be judged.

5. Threat and use of violence.

Thompson suggests (127) that oppression operates at three levels:

1. The Personal or Individual level - the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour that show a negative prejudgment of a particular group.

2. The Cultural level - the values, norms and shared patterns of seeing, thinking, and activity and the assumed consensus of what is considered right or wrong and the way in which the dominated group portrays the subordinate group in its history, literature, media, movies and popular culture.

3. The Structural level - the ways in which social institutions, laws, policies, social processes and practice, economic and political system work together to favour the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups.
In whichever way oppression is executed, the dominant group who oppresses people is the one with power. Without power, people cannot create class systems, determine who can work, have the power to dictate people, impose their culture on others or allow committing violence. Without the power politics people are subjugated to the earlier said five categories of oppression and work in three levels. Thus oppression immobilizes or diminishes a group, dehumanizes them and attempts to wipe out their traditions and consciousness.

4.2 Oppression

The oppression of women has been a key question lately and women constituting half the human race face discrimination and degradation in many areas of life. The oppression of women in the third world has reached abominable levels. It is believed that the oppression of women did not always exist. In historical terms it is relatively a new phenomenon. It arose with the division of society with classes and the emergence of class society some six thousand years ago. Prior to that, in the period described by the American Anthropologist Morgan (231) as primitive communism, neither classes, state, properties nor the family existed. There was no domination of man over woman or man over man. As there was no surplus created, things produced were enough to survive only; there was no exploitation, which only emerged with the development of slave empires of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and
Rome. The root of woman’s oppression lies not in biology but in social conditions.

The social conditions of the countries in different centuries found them incorporated in the literary canons of countries. A striking feature has been the need to redefine certain aspects of society and culture that had for long been taken for granted. Oppression and repression that existed in the Western and Eastern literatures are being teased out, deconstructed and new meanings are attributed which lead to new theories. Writers from the subordinate groups or the subalterns have found space to express their experiences so that the world could understand their plight. Such writings need not be considered to be ‘oppressive’, but it only defines the cruelty of the upper class, superior race and rich society. The creative outpouring indicated the coming of age of women’s, especially subaltern women’s literary tradition. It is at this juncture that the oppression suffered by Maya Angelou and Bama becomes relevant. The lived experiences of these two writers especially the oppression faced by them is dealt at three levels - the societal level, gender level and religious level.

In a patriarchal society, woman is defined as a marginalized creature. She is never an autonomous self; but just incidental, the essential and an appendage to man. As long as she fulfils this condition she becomes powerless and causes a serious threat to a person’s liberation. It is the patriarchal indoctrination that shapes woman’s psyche and makes her believe that she is really the big other. De Beauvoir writes, “Women are a female to the extent
that she feels herself as such” (69). She means that “woman can be defined by her consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is the member” (80). Literary texts express the authors’ experiences and reveal the truth about their world and they provide the readers access to universal dimension of human nature. Women’s experiences, both domestic and social, were used as a resource for critical discussion, making it possible for the women to share dimensions of their lives they had kept secret or felt too insecure to confront or even recognize.

Oppression suffered by the blacks and dalit women varies in its degree, extent or intensity. The individual experiences of the black and dalit women writers reveal the condition of the marginalized section of the society which is deprived of economic, political or religious power. They are often segregated and exploited by the customs and traditions that are prevalent in the social organizations. Oppression is also communicated through physical violence which maimed the psyche and struggled for self-definition. This is especially true for African-American women, who suffered hardships from European Americans and often neglect from African-American men, leaving them nothing but negative experiences for which to base their existence. Black writers Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Zora Neale Hurston, and of course Maya Angelou come to terms with the past and construct a critique of the present. They problematize community by contrasting the vital bonds uniting their mother’s generation with the erosion of black cultural identity and
surrender to commodification which occurred under capitalism. In the poem ‘Good Night Willie Lee’, Walker remarks:

It is hard for me to write,

What everybody already knows (48).

It articulates the trauma of the black writers who struggle to show to the world how terrible the impact of oppression for the oppressed is. The world is aware of racial oppression, sexual oppression, class oppression, but may not know how extensive oppression is, how it works in an individual or in a community and how these modes are interrelated. Black women’s writings confront oppression in an astute and critical way, on the basis of deeply felt human needs and desires.

4.2.1 Black Childhood Experiences

Angelou’s first work of literature I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings uses the metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage, as described in Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy”, as its central image and subsequently throughout her series of autobiographies. Like elements within a prison narrative, the caged bird represents Angelou’s confinement resulting from racism and oppression and she explains the condition of African-Americans in the United States without alienating any of her readers. Angelou’s struggle is not the struggle of the individual alone and can be viewed as the struggle of the entire race of black women. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings reflects the struggle of Angelou in a hostile environment. She says, “Growing up is painful for the Southern Black
girl and being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat.” (3)

Angelou begins the chapter of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with the coming of two kids aged three and four, Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, to their paternal grandmother’s house at Stamps, Arkansas. Due to the calamitous marriage of their parents, these kids were shipped from California to Mrs. Annie Henderson whom the children called Momma lovingly. She was running a store there and little Marguerite happened to see for the first time the racial problems in the country and later to experience them. She observes the harsh life of the black cotton pickers. After days of work, the workers would step out of the back of trucks and fold down, disappointed and dirty, to the ground. No matter how much they picked, it wasn’t enough. Their wages wouldn’t even get them “out of debt to my grand mother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown” (*Cage* 7). Angelou witnessed not only the worker-employer power line but racism and poverty suffered by the blacks in the southern states. When a black boy ‘messed with’ a white lady, they were so frightened that all black men scurried under their houses to hide in chicken droppings. In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really know what Whites really looked like.

Angelou explains her crossing the black area to the whites as “we were explorers walking without weapons into man eating animals’ territory” (*Cage*
20). It shows the dread the black suffered, including the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. People in Stamps used to say that the whites were so prejudiced that a Negro could not buy Vanilla icecream ‘except on July Fourth’, other days he had to be satisfied with chocolates. Windham, the social critic, comments (9):

The individuality of consciousness is denied by the existing culture via mandate of the society … consciousness is suppressed by the constant bombardment of the stimuli. The stimuli representing the existing social order become the content of the cognitive component of consciousness.

The gigantic and complex myth woven by the dominant society produces and makes the Blacks believe in their inferiority.

The Negro girls were given an exclusive and irrelevant preparation for adulthood as rich White girls were. Before they were a debutante, they were taught embroidery, crocheting and tatting; they learn to iron and wash, bake, roast and cook vegetables and all feminine jobs. Angelou too underwent such schooling and at her tenth year, at a white woman’s kitchen, learnt the difference between a salad plate, a bread plate and a dessert plate.

Racism worked through the society and encroached into the schools too. Unlike the White High School, Lafayette County Training School for the Black distinguished itself by having neither lawn nor hedges nor tennis court - its two
buildings were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or these of bordering farms. Angelou painfully remembers that the school trained “Negro youths to be carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks, and baby nurses. Their future rode heavily on their shoulder” (Cage 143). In spite of graduating at the top of the class Angelou only felt awful to be a Negro: “It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defence. We should all be dead” (Cage 153). As a species she felt they were an abomination. In another instance when she suffered from a tooth ache, the white doctor refused to treat little Angelou. He shouted to her grandmother, “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (Cage 160). The humiliation was much more painful than the throbbing tooth ache, and it seemed terribly unfair to have a tooth ache and a head ache and has to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness. In a racist society where the blacks are dehumanized and degraded on account of their blackness, they, somewhere in their fragile corners of their egos, often feel belittled and inferior and were haunted by a nagging sense of self rejection. This internalization submerges their consciousness and they become powerless. It even produces fear from freedom in the victim’s psyche. Momma wished to send the children to California to their mother. Bailey questioned their uncle Willie what coloured people had done to white people. Momma explains that white people had come over to Africa and stole the colored people and made them slaves and that they had the upper hand. But Momma did not forget to say that their time was up. She
equated the black to the Jews, “Didn’t the Lord protect the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace and didn’t my lord deliver Daniel? We only had to wait on the Lord” (Cage 166). When the children were shifted to the care of their mother Vivian Baxter, San Franciscans would have sworn that racism was missing from the heart of their city. But they were sadly mistaken. San Franciscans often refused to sit beside Negro civilians on the streetcar, even after they made room for them on the seat.

But San Francisco’s Fillmore district experienced a visible revolution when the Japanese shops were taken over by enterprising Negro businessmen and in less than a year became permanent homes of the Southern Blacks. The Japanese disappeared and without protest the Negroes entered with their loud juke boxes, their animosities and the relief of escape from Southern bonds. The Japanese area became San Francisco’s Harlem. Angelou saw how the blacks were becoming a boss, a spender. In the school she found to her disappointment that the white kids had better vocabulary than her. Angelou remembers how her education and of other blacks were quite different from the education of the white schoolmates:

In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop s’s from plural and suffixes from past tense verbs. We were alert to the gap separating the writing word from the colloquial (Cage 191).
Angelou here accentuates the black culture thereby projecting the African-American identity.

At a very young age of seventeen she was with a fatherless son. She describes herself as “… very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months” (*Gather 3*). Whenever Angelou went shopping in Stamps she dressed as in San Francisco only to show the black women and the white women that she knew how things should be done. She wanted to show the Whites that there are legions of Black women in other parts of the world who knew as they did and up went the Black status. She had to take up different roles from a Creole cook to a prostitute only to raise her black child in a racist society. The black mother had to constantly live with the realization that her son might be killed for exercising the prerogatives of manhood. When Angelou was meeting Tosh, her mother reminded her that “… white folks have taken advantage of Black people for centuries” (*Singing 27*). She had to take a decision but an unrevealed knowledge within her had made the decision, enforced by the centuries of slavery, the violation of the blacks, the violence of whites, “Anger and guilt decided before my birth that Black was Black and White was White and although the two might share sex, they must never exchange love” (*Singing 28*).

She could never forget slavery tales or her life in the Southern part where all whites, including the poor and ignorant, had the right to speak rudely to and even physically abuse any Negro they met, “I know the ugliness of
white prejudice. Obviously there was no common ground on which Tosh and I might meet” (*Singing* 28).

**4.2.2. Black Consciousness**

Angelou learnt to dance ‘time step’ at Louie’s. It is from this basic step that most American-Black dances are born. It is a series of taps, jumps and rests and demands careful listening, feeling, and co-ordination. With determination she learnt it and it had helped her later in her life as a life saving activity. Being a dancer and a singer she worked in different places as show girl. When she came to ‘The Purple Onion’, they wanted a folk song and when Angelou came forward to sing a Calypso song, they exchanged laughter and she understood the hidden joke, “Do you think Calypso music isn’t folk music? Folks sing it or do you believe because the folks are Negroes their music doesn’t count or that because they’re Negroes they aren’t folk?” (*Singing* 83).

When Jorie, the chief dancer of the troupe, commented and mimicked the black dialect, infuriated Angelou said, “When you or any white person says ‘dis’ or ‘dat’, it is certain that you intend to ridicule. When a Black person says it, it is because that’s the way he speaks. There’s a difference” (83).

Anger and haughtiness, pride and prejudice - her old habits - lashed out furiously against insults. She suffered as an injured party. The historically oppressed can find not only sanctity but safety in the state of victimization. When access to better life is denied, one can use rejection as an excuse to cease
all efforts. Negroes had survived centuries of inhuman treatment and retained their humanity but at the same time prepared for the worst.

Angelou wrote her experiences as a black woman in her novels. The blacks were considered to be less than human beings and treated as animals or slaves, and in such situations the blacks suffered identity crisis. Angelo writes that she left ‘The Purple Onion’ to become the member of ‘Porgy and Bess’ because “Porgy and Bess had shown me the greatest array of Negro talent I had ever seen” (*Singing* 127). Preparation is ‘rarely easy and never beautiful’ was the first lesson she learnt form Porgy and Bess. She got a chance to travel to Italy, “I wanted to travel, to try to speak other languages, to see the cities I had read about all my life, but most important, I wanted to be with a large friendly group of Black people … sang so gloriously and lived with such passion” (*Singing* 143 - 4).

There was revulsion on the faces when the Italians looked at the Blacks. Angelou concluded that they had never seen so many Black people before and they were frightened and repelled. In Yugoslav also, she confronted a similar situation. The ordinary citizens crowded into the hotel windows to get a glimpse of them and when one got sight of them they nudged the persons nearby and all craned their necks, eyes bulging, and laughed uproariously. They were so intimidated that Martha commented, “They think we are monkeys or something” (*Singing* 187). Ethel continued, “They think we are in a cage. I wouldn’t be surprised if they threw peanuts at us” (187). No matter
where they went the blacks were discriminated and ostracized. In such conditions they feel an estrangement where one’s identity itself is questioned. This personal estrangement involuntarily leaks into the community and encapsulated and compartmentalized in a degrading role that Martha and Ethel considered their rooms to be cages and them the monkeys. Under such circumstances the oppressed remains divorced from their own value structures and there is a strong vulnerability – an irresistible one to be assimilated into the culture of the dominant culture. If so their identity comes under serious threat that they resign to seek meaning out of marginality and isolation.

Maya Angelou talks about racism as the salt to the tongue; it could be as dangerous as too much salt. Moreover, she says that racism is not the acts against blacks, but the vulgarities against any human being because of her / his race and that is vulgar. She tasted the salt of vulgarity in Africa, her ancestral land which was shocking and disappointing. When they went to Cairo, she found the black-skinned people holding positions of authority and felt released from the weight of colonialism, which had ridden its back for generations. After returning from Cairo, she “allowed my hair to grow into a wide unstraightened hedge which made me look, at a distance, like a tall brown tree whose branches had been clipped” (Heart 4). This action of her reinforces the self-identity which is at jeopardy. Racial instinct in her slowly compelled her not to fall into lapless, powerless individual but a bold, firm, and Black woman. Angelou felt a feminine loneliness when her son grew up but she wanted her son to become a man and not a woman. Whenever there was distrust she
believed that life loved the person who dared to live it. When she took an apartment for her and her son, the landlord was shocked that his tenants were black and Angelou noticed the revulsion that made him recoil. But the company of the good friends made her overcome such complexities. Angelou was climbing the ladder of success as a singer of Black folk songs and Blues. As she indulged into the Blues, racist feelings imbued in her. When Bille Holiday sang her famous ‘Strange Fruit’, a protest song, Angelou imagined the black bodies hanging from Southern trees, “I saw the lynch victim’s blood glide from the leaves down the trunks and onto the roots” (Heart 14). Her mother Vivian had advised her that “Black folks can’t change because white folks won’t change” (Heart 29). With all the contradictions she should remain stable for her son and she must tell the truth about the power of white without suggesting that it cannot be challenged.

It was John Kellins who introduced Angelou to the Harlem Guild. It was a loosely formed organization without dues or membership cards but had one strict rule that any invited guest could sit in for three meetings and the visitor had to read from his or her work in progress. There were Sarah Wright, Sylvester Leeks, John Clarke, Mary Delany, Millie Jordan, Paule Marshall, James Baldwin and other writers. When Angelou tried to present a play, she was asked to rewrite it. She was taught the lesson that trying to overcome was black people’s honorable tradition. When she was enfolded into the Black Writers’ Guild, she acquired a new black identity and decided to quit show business and not to go pleading to white men for work. Black people in Harlem
were also changing and the Apollo audience was Black. Black men and women had begun to wear multi-coloured African prints which was the sure sign of accepting one’s identity as the natives of Africa living in America. The echo of the African drums was not far away. Angelou discovered that music could create change in the mind of the people. Her life, she believed like the lives of the other black Americans, would be credited to miraculous experiences. When she went to Apollo theatre to sing, she was advised not to include the black audience in the singing, but she made it a point to include them and that was her style. She remembered her mother who said, “Since you are black, you have to hope for the best. Be prepared for the worst and always know that anything can happen” (Heart 52). She sang some Afro-Cuban songs and announced that her next encore was an African song called “Freedom” in Swahili. They applauded, ready to go with her to that wished-for land. She explained to them:

if you believe you deserve freedom, if you really want it, if you believe it should be yours, you must sing:

“U hu uhuru oh yea freedom
U hu uhuru oh yea freedom
Uh huh uh hum” (Heart 48).

The audience sang passionately. They accepted her, understood her because she was singing the anthem and carrying the flag. The applause was long and the crowd thundered a hot appreciation. She had merely ignited the
fire of freedom into them and into her, “It was our history, our painful passage and uneven present that burned luminously in the dark theatre” (*Heart* 50).

Angelou had the rare opportunity to work with both Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. Luther King had been released from jail and was in New York in 1960 to raise money for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to make Northerners aware of the fight that was being waged in the Southern states. Angelou says admiringly:

He was here, our own man, black, intelligent and fearless. He was going to be born to us in a moment. It would stand up behind the pulpit, full grown and justify the years of sacrifice and the days of humiliation. He was the best we had, the bright and most beautiful (*Heart* 55).

Angelou along with the surging Southern Blacks was elated hearing him. He, in his speech, prodded the black conscious to be aware of the oppression they suffer and it was a call for freedom:

We, the black people, the most displaced and the poorest, the most maligned and scourged; we had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul and saving the honour of the country. We, the most hated, must take hate into our hands and by the miracle of love, turn loathing into love. We, the most feared and apprehensive, must take fear and by love, change it into hope. We, who die daily in large and small ways, must take the demon death and turn it into life (*Heart* 56).
Everyone in the crowd knew that he meant how oppression had made orphans of Black-Americans and forced them to live as misfits in the very land they had helped to build. Angelou joined the civil rights movement and became the co-coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The black public reacted differently. Some considered Martin King a fool because he, like Jesus Christ, believed in ‘love your enemies’ philosophy and the blacks were skeptical because Jesus was lynched. King’s argument on redemptive suffering made him like Mahatma Gandhi of India who worked on Truth and Ahimsa. Unfortunately Angelou found it difficult to accept this view. She had seen “distress fester souls and bend people’s bodies out of shape, but I had yet to see anyone redeemed from pain by pain” (Heart 93).

The spirit of Harlem was new and old and dynamic. Black children and white children thronged the streets enroute to protest marches or to liberation offices. Black Nationalists spoke on the street corners demanding freedom. Black Muslims charged the white community with genocide and insisted on immediate and total segregation from the murdering ‘blue-eyed devils’. The national mood was one of action and the older groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League were losing ground to progressive organizations. It was in these times that the Cuban President Fidel Castro and Khrushchev of Soviet Union met on the 125th street and embraced. Blacks joined the applause with the Cubans and the Russians. Anyhow Americans hated Russians and as Black people often said, “… wasn’t no communist country that put my grand poppa in slavery. Wasn’t no communist lynched my pappa or raped my mamma”
(Heart 96). After witnessing the two strong forces, Angelou’s son Guy remarked, “I am seeing powerful forces get together to oppose capitalism. It will influence my future” (Heart 97). During her busy days of activity she met Vusumizi Make who systematically explained how Africa was bludgeoned by slavery, having her strongest sons and daughters stolen and brought to build the country of the slaves. He said that the spirit of Africa lives and it was vital that they help and encourage the people in South Africa too. They, knowing slavery first hand, had found the oppressor to be a formidable but opposable foe. He explains the condition of the African people, “We, Africans are written out of all tenets dealing with justice. We are not considered in the written laws dealing with fair play. We are not only brutalized and oppressed de facto, we are ignored de jure” (Heart 109).

They had been encouraged by Malcolm X and the Muslims to set themselves apart from their oppressors. Make believed that Malcolm X had the right ideas and Martin King was using tactics which had only been effective in India. Africa was the real ‘Old World’ and America was aptly described by George Bernard Shaw who said that it was the only country which had gone from barbarism to decadence without once passing through civilization.

Patrice Lumumba, one of the Holy African Triumvirates, was assassinated in Congo by Whites. Malcolm X spoke with indignation, “The black man has been programmed to die. To die either by his own hand, the hand of his brother or at the hand of a blue eyed devil trained to so” (Heart
When Malcolm X was told that he looked more a white than a Negro, he replied:

As slaves, we were the property of slave masters, our men were worked to death and many of our children were born looking like me. The slave master fathers denied their children, but fortunately we retained enough Africanism to believe that the mother’s child was our child, no matter who or what the father had been (All God 137).

The root cause of racism and its primary result is that whites refuse to see the blacks simply as people. Their background, their history makes them act differently. Paul Marshall, the pioneer of the black women’s renaissance, feels that the commitment of the black artist is to remain faithful to his or her personal vision and build an internal strength within their communities and thus could free their minds from psychological bondages through the most truthful portrayal of the black self.

In All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes, Angelou writes her experiences in West Africa. There is joy in finding herself and her son among the blacks and sorrow to know that they were not accepted as one among them. Even though she felt at home in the country she was disappointed due to the inability to speak the language of the people, “Without a language it is very difficult to communicate” (All God 42). It pained them that they were ignored. They were categorized or listed as ‘Beentoos’, a derisive word used for a
person who had studied abroad and returned to Ghana with European airs. She was envious of the natives who remained in the continent out of fortune or perfidy. Though their country had been exploited and their culture had been discredited by colonialism they could still reflect the names of their ancestors who lived centuries ago. Despite political bondage and economic exploitation, they had possessed the land beyond remembered time. Angelou doubted if any black from the diaspora could really return to Africa, “We saw ourselves as frail rafters on an ocean of political turbulence. If we were not welcome in Ghana, the most progressively black nation in Africa, where would we find harbor?” (*All God* 80).

There is a pain of non existence and disappointment of unacceptance in her but her spirits went up when she met a tribal woman who took her to her settlement and they tried to detect her tribal origin as Bambara, even though she hid her nativity. Angelou writes, “For the first time since my arrival, I was very nearly home. Not a Ghanaian, but at least accepted as an African. The sensation was worth a lie” (*All God* 102). When Angelou was in Africa, Dr. Du Bois died. For the blacks he was the first American Negro intellect, who in 1904 said, “The problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the color line” (*All God* 125).

In Africa they began to realize that the ‘stars and stripes’ was their flag and that knowledge was almost too painful to bear:
We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, even marry and remain on African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States and it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited then denied us (*All God* 127).

America had lifted them up with its promise and broke their heart with its denial. Angelou was caught in the racial dilemma. The American dilemma unconsciously leads them to alienation. She feels:

> If the heart of Africa still remained allusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned” (*All God* 196).

She decided to go to the United States. She believed that under the leadership of Malcolm they would get rid of racism once and for all. But shockingly Malcolm was killed by his own community while addressing them about their better future. Angelou was so shocked by the loss that she was laid up with narcolepsy. When Martin Luther King died, his name was linked again with the name of Malcolm X as if the life and death of one confirmed the life and death of the other. James Baldwin comforted her:

> We survived slavery not because we were strong. We survived because we put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales. We danced surviving in Congo Square in New
Orleans and put it in our pots when we cooked Pinto beans (A Song 199).

Angelou was torn by guilt for neglecting her duty towards her son in the midst of her hectic activities. It is rightly said that, “Every black woman in this country has her head in a lion’s mouth” (A Song 61). But it is this intense commitment to the black cause that contributed to create awareness among the blacks about their identity and desire for changing the social set up. She reminded them of the need to understand their culture and history lest they remain the displaced people in America. She pondered about the reasons for the marginalized status of the black women. She comments, “In our country, white men were always in superior positions; after them came white women, then black men, then black women who were historically on the bottom stratum” (A Song 211).

With a feminine pride of a black she designed a series called ‘Blacks Blues Black’ after her sojourn to Africa. Angelou felt that “We were blacks in Africa before we were brought to America as slaves, where we created blues, and now we were painfully and proudly returning to being upstanding free blacks again” (A Song 204). Racial freedom was equated with the redemption of black manhood. But racism is more harmful to black women than it is to black men is what Angelou has revealed in her writings. The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries and there is a commonality in their sufferings which can be related to the oppression encountered by the dalit
women in India. Beyond such sisterhood, there are differences in their painful experiences.

4.2.3. Dalit Childhood Experiences

Discrimination of a particular community is visibly prevalent in the Indian scenario also. One of the most affected groups in this category is undoubtedly the dalit community. During the nationalist struggle, reformers and national leaders had argued for social transformation and revolution only in the case of widow remarriage and child marriage and none spoke about untouchability. It was Dr. Ambedkar who argued for the deplorable state of untouchables, but no social reformation happened. Their hapless condition and colonized social status have been depicted with first hand knowledge by writers from their community itself. Bama, for example, has vehemently documented the atrocities inflicted on the paraya community, to which she too belongs, by the upper caste society in India. The saga of oppression which unfolds in Karukku was not her story alone but the true depiction of a collective trauma. She in an interview said, “Of my community, whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages” (Bama Interview 2001).

Her first autobiographical work Karukku explains that life is suffering for dalits. ‘Karukku’ means Palmyra leaves, which with their serrated edges on
both sides are like double edged swords. She describes her caste-based trauma in corporeal terms:

Not only did I pick up the scattered Palmyra Karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them. The driving forces that shaped this book are many events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed… (xiii).

She believes that unjust social structures plunged her into ignorance and she felt trapped and suffocated and her desperate urge to break away from it made her bleed.

Through her novels Bama exposes the caste oppression, poverty and inequality she herself had experienced as part of a particular community. Bama’s reflections on her childhood, in a caste divided village in Tamil Nadu, made her recreate her experiences as a dalit child in her Karukku. The innocent child Bama, unknown of untouchability, witnessed an elder from her community bringing Naicker some vadais in a small packet and holding it by its string. Though she was amused at first, she learnt from her brother that Naickers are upper castes and they the Parayas are lower caste and therefore the paraya must not touch them lest they were polluted. She understood the humiliation of being a paraya, “Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings” (K 18). Likewise the upper caste women giving drinking water to the lower caste was disquieting to watch. The Naicker women would
pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Bama’s grandmother, ‘Paati’ and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. The untouchability practised was terrible for her to bear. It was heart wringing to see her Paati keeping her vessel near a drain and the Naicker woman tipping the left-over into the vessel. But Paati said, “These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation and haven’t we been lower caste? Can we change this?” (K 14).

According to Daly, this situation creates “psychological paralysis.”³ Fanon calls it “neurotic orientation.”⁴ The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and having adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Moreover they willfully liquidate their own individuality, annihilate their own presence, suspend their own consciousness and allow themselves to blindly follow the value structures of the oppressor. Sangati, her second novel, is an autobiography of a community itself. Every anecdote largely explains the caste suppression undergone by the Parayas and especially by the Paraya women. Bama endeavors to expand feminist agenda to enlist caste oppression as a subject of concern. She clarifies her stance thus:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide (S ix).
Bama wants her community people not to be terrified by the upper caste’s oppressive tactics but to boldly counter the injustices that came their way, “Because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt …. The government does not seem prepared to do anything to redress this. So we must take up the challenge ourselves” (S 66). By bringing in an analogy she explains:

If a man sees a terrified dog it is natural to chase it with a stick or stone. But if the dog stares back, those who chase him will creep away with their tails between their legs. If we continued to be frightened everyone will take advantage of us (S 66).

Poverty and illiteracy have driven the dalits to the extreme that they almost accept the upper caste domain.

Dalit children are victims of negative stereotyping and of the aspirations cast by teachers who have internalized these stereo types. Bama records her experiences of being victimized thus at school and college in her Karukku which is simultaneously an intense personal experience and that of a community. If any untoward incident happened at school, the blame would undoubtedly fall on the slum children who did it. Though Harijan children were considered untouchables, they were used for cheap labour like carrying water to the teacher’s house, watering the plants and they were made to do the entire chorus that were needed for the school. The much maligned paraya community is often considered to be dirty and ‘naturally’ prone to criminal activities.
When Bama was in the seventh standard, she was wrongfully accused of having stolen mangoes from the tree which stood in the school compound. Hence, when the headmaster said, “You have shown us your true nature as a paraya” (K 16), or when the priest said, “… after all you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (K 17), they were voicing the generally propagated negative opinion about the paraya community or Dalits as such.

When Bama was in a hostel she found that the warden-sister could not abide low-caste or poor children. She insulted them whenever she got an opportunity. When they returned to school after holidays, she would say, “Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home - just skin and bone!” (K 17). Naicker women did not sit near them in a bus because they believed that they would be polluted by sitting near them. There were other similarly embarrassing situations which reiterated their oppressive state.

Bama after graduating began to look for jobs and it was then that she realized that “even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn a livelihood. Being a dalit creates a problem” (S 119). It was sad to note that Bama, being a Dalit woman and unmarried, was not easily accepted into the fold of society. They questioned her village, name, parents, her job, property etc to rent her a house. It was hard to find lodgings as it was to find employment, “People hesitate to rent houses to Dalits” (K 120). She was not
ready to compromise the truth for the sake of lodging, “I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud: I am a Paraichi; Yes, I am a Paraichi. And I don’t like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste” (K 121).

Women of other castes don’t face such problems because they are free to move anywhere, take a house or set up a livelihood, “But we are denied the basic right to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others?” (K 121). Bama expresses her anguish over the caste discrimination when harsh experiences descend on her:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched life style is all that is left to us (K 23).

The depiction of the machinery of the state and its inefficiency in helping the dalits in any way is an important subtext in Karukku. The legal system, the police, the legislatures, providing access to and admissions in schools and colleges prove quiet ineffective in their final implementation as the people involved in executing these policies are often themselves full of pre-conceived notions of essentialized caste related behaviour. Bama to her surprise heard her
lecturer announce, “Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that scheduled caste students should get special tuition in the evenings” (K 19). Only two students stood up and one was Bama. The other students were ‘bitter with contempt’ and she was filled with a sudden rage. Even if the government prefers to call this ‘positive discrimination’ or ‘affirmative action’ the effect it created is to intensify the prejudices instead of removing them, “It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went” (K 19).

After entering into a convent as a nun, she had a very different and trying experience which proved that casteism has infiltrated into religious institutions too. To her dismay she found that the convent did not care for the poor and low caste children, “In that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way” (K 66).

The Dalits who desire to be priests or nuns is thwarted by marginalizing them from the initial stage itself, “It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation we find there is no place for us there” (K 69). When a comfortable living was offered to her she felt so strange about it that she was ashamed as if she had gone into a Naicker home. The guilt of enjoying life and comfortable living kept her silent and awkward. She witnessed supremacy residing there which emitted power, and others should accept and obey what the superiors dictated. If they refused or
questioned them then they were accused of wrong childhood and upbringing or blamed their family for having a fatal flaw. The agony of being there as a Novice was difficult and no one knew that she was a dalit. She did not dare to disclose her status as a dalit. Their treatment of the dalits as ‘the other’ often perplexed Bama as they were supposedly capable of bringing into being God’s kingdom where there are neither highs nor lows. She shrank into herself when they abused the dalits thus (K 99),

“… how can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their places.”

“… there is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we should not do anything for them. Because to do so would be like helping cobras.”

The nuns in the holy order had committed a heinous crime of blasphemy by verbally assaulting the dalits, claiming them to be subordinate class, not even considering them to be human beings but ‘creatures’ and venomous ‘cobras’. The nuns decisively impeach that the dalits would never progress and remain illiterates whatever the government gives or tries to do. They comment adversely about their good dressing. The unpleasant experience of hearing that tirade pained her and made her wonder how such tainted minds could render service to people.
4.2.4. Dalit Oppression

The various institutions, the school, church etc, promote and sustain untouchability and the economic oppression goes hand in hand with caste oppression. Bama writes of the oppression that dalits face from the state and a brutal police force in her *Karukku* and *Vanmam*. In a fight between Parayas and Chaaliyars to claim the cemetery, a communal calamity arose in the village and the Reserve police posted there created a terrific fear in them. Men went under hiding and some women helped their men to hide from police. Police entered the houses in search of men who were in hiding. Some women hid their husbands and brothers from police. This invited the wrath of the police and so they rounded up the women too. The police force that should ideally help in implementing pro-dalit laws became a further means of oppression. The failure of the police force in enforcing the laws to reduce violence against the dalits is strongly brought out in *Karukku*. In an Interview Bama had said, “You can’t imagine Dalits, even as a group, to fight against the police force. They are like upper caste people to dalits. They do all kinds of violence and atrocities. We don’t trust police” (Bama, *Interview* Personal).

The trauma of half discrimination was so severe that they felt a strong sense of alienation that can lead to self doubt and questioning their very identity. Bama herself has experienced this angst:

> Are dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self respect?
Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don’t even possess human dignity. They seem to conspire to keep us in our place; to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that, we should never move on or go forward (K 24).

Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation and being told again and again of their degradation that they have come to believe themselves as degraded, lacking honour and self worth as untouchables, they have reached a stage where they themselves voluntarily hold themselves apart.

The psychological feeling of abjection enmeshed lower groups in such a social structure that they are threatened constantly by the hegemonic group that they struggle continuously against, to prevent falling off the social ladder further. When they are unable to fight the dominant group, the violence turns against their own people, that is, the other lower castes work off their hatred. This is illustrated in Vanmam where the Pallars and Parayas fight against each other. Fanon calls such a situation as ‘reactionary psychosis’, where the oppressed are internalized and victimized by the dominant group that they turn against other oppressed classes to relieve their self-hatred. The Pallars and Parayas treat each other as outcasts within their own social habitat. While Parayas have embraced Christianity, the Pallars remain Hindus and this fact is played up by Naickers and other upper castes to keep the two dalit
communities divided. But hopelessly driven to self-hatred and self-destruction, they fight and kill each other. Naickers enjoyed the fighting and killing immensely and fanned the hidden hostility between the upper and lower castes. The subjugation had gone to the level of Pallars becoming the victims of Naickers unconsciously. Bama writes in *Vanmaam* about a custom prevalent among the lower caste people called ‘udayaru vaikkal’ which means ‘offerings’. The Pallars and Parayas used to take cockerels, pumpkins, sugarcane, rice and other products from the field to the landlords on Pongal day, a harvest festival, as offerings. The educated Paraya boys considered this custom too humiliating and questioned the custom. What they could not understand was why the Pallars and Parayas who had worked hard in the fields should carry the fruit of their hard work as offerings to the landlords, only to get in return a little bit of ‘Pongal’ that too standing far away from them, being untouchables. It was dehumanizing to continue with the custom which perpetuated untouchability and colonial imperialism. The Parayas stopped the lowly custom and gradually the Pallars also followed suit. This must have so enraged the Naickers that they wanted to strike them by provoking these vulnerable groups to fight. The landlords were happy and satisfied with the Pallars who work for them because they could still exercise their power over them and hence will never raise a protesting voice. Thus the self-denial attitude in the Pallars made them subservient creatures which disarm and silence them. The worst injustice the Paraya community or the dalits faced was the burial of their dead. Though they might belong to the Christian sect, they were allotted
separate burial grounds. Society has pushed them to the outskirts of the village almost near the cemetery, for their living space. They are marginalized in every possible way. Since they are literally pushed to the margin of the village for a living space their marginalization becomes complete.

After leaving the convent and losing her job, Bama involves herself with the issues of the deprived dalits. She expresses her anguish in *Karukku* thus:

Life is difficult if you happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper class. When this is the case, the condition of those who are born into the paraya community as the poorest of the poor struggling for daily survival, doesn’t need spelling out (*K* 67 - 68).

The personal humiliations, sufferings and feelings are drawn out by her but it is the agony of the community too. Bama’s writings on discrimination and oppression are on the grounds of not only caste but also gender.

### 4.3 Male Tyranny and Female Agony

When Angelou and Bama depict the racist and casteist segregation suffered by the black and dalit women, they also foreground a social system that targets blacks and dalit women most unjustly just because they are females. They do not enjoy the status and individual dignity in the male dominated world. Theirs is a double jeopardy. Morrison also comments in her work *The Bluest Eye*:

Being a minority in both caste and class, we move about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang
on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence however was something we learned to deal with probably because it was abstract (11).

Claudia’s words sum up the oppression, rejection and submission suffered by the black women in a patriarchal society. Angelou’s confrontations with the male world left her scared and maimed for life. At the age of eight, she had the traumatic experience of a rape at the hands of her mother’s live-in boy friend, Freeman, which left her stunned. She remembers him as a man who seldom spoke but she was such an innocent child that she longed the company of Freeman. But when he raped her she said, “… the child gives because the body and mind of the violator cannot” (Cage 65). It was an intended physical violence threatening that he would kill Bailey otherwise. But the truth was out and Freeman was arrested. During the trial, the child suffered agony because she had to tell a lie that he had not touched her before. Afflicted with guilt after Freeman was killed by her uncles, Angelou lapsed into an almost catatonic silence, providing an excuse to her mother to send her back to Stamps. Coming back to her grandmother was like creeping into a cocoon. She was psychologically crippled and doubted if she was losing her sanity. A Black angel, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a rich aristocrat of Black Stamps came to her rescue. She gave Angelou ‘lessons in living’ and made her proud to be a Negro. An experiment with sex to dispel her haunting doubts about her own female identity thrusts her into realms of life as a young mother of seventeen. She
describes herself as ‘very old, embarrassing young’ with a son of two months.

The black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that “she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (Cage 231). The victim of familial rape in *Colour Purple* by Alice Walker also internalizes guilt in a complex way that the incident becomes unequivocally innocent. In the writings of Alice Walker and Angelou, the development of the female subject’s ‘self’ begins after the rape and occupies the entire length of the narrative. Angelou was also growing up along with her son. She burdened herself with different jobs to earn money to keep herself and her son alive. She was only nineteen, and at a time worked as a prostitute and as madam of a brothel. Angelou realized that boys think that girls hold the keys to all happiness because the female is supposed to have the right of consent and / or dissent.

I’ve heard older man reflect on their youth, and an edge of hostile envy drags across their voices as they conjure up the girls who whetted but didn’t satisfy their sexual appetites. It’s interesting that they didn’t realize in those yearning days past, or even in the present days of understanding that if the female had the right to decide, she suffered from her inability to instigate. That is, she could only say yes or no if she was asked (*Gather* 141).
4.3.1 Black and White Husbands

In a patriarchal society, woman is defined as a marginalized creature. Black women fall under insecurity and suspicion between the sexes and militate against the survival of the species, yet men do legalize their poking and women do get revenge all their lives through insecurity and bear children so that the whole process remains in progress. Angelou also believed in the system of having a husband and family. She writes, “I had the affliction suffered by most young women. I looked forward to a husband who would love me ethereally, spiritually and on rare occasions, physically” (Gather 141).

She too dreamed of being ‘one man’s woman.’ She believed that marriage would offer her a world free from danger, disease and want. She married Tosh Angelos, a Greek military man. She could never forget the slavery tales of the southern part where all whites, including the poor and ignorant, had the right to speak rudely to and even physically abuse any Negro they met, “I knew the ugliness of white prejudice. Obviously there are no common grounds on which Tosh and I might meet” (Gather 28). Tosh appeared to be a better husband than she had dreamed. But Tosh did no allow anyone to visit the house except two of his former friends. He explained that the people she liked or had known or thought she liked where all stupid and beneath her. She found herself and her son wrapped up in a cocoon. Moreover Tosh being an atheist also stopped her from belief, “I knew I was a child of God who existed but also the wife of a husband who was angered at my belief.
I surrendered” (Gather 33). She attended Sunday church secretly but soon the truth was discovered and she made no protest, gave no confession but just stood silent, and allowed a little more of her territory to be taken away. Their relationship strained and she had a mixed feeling of guilt, remorse, disappointment and sorrow.

I had placed my life within the confines of my marriage. I was everything the magazine said a wife should be. Constant, faithful and clean. I was economical. I never complaint, never offering head aches as excuses for not sharing the marital bed… (Gather 43).

When Tosh left her, Angelou immersed in self-pity with the feeling that again a white man had taken a Black woman’s body and left her hopeless, helpless and alone. Later she thought about women who accepted their husband’s inattention and sacrificed all their sovereignty for a humiliating marriage which is more unsavory than the prostitutes who keep themselves awake by drinking. It was all a mistake for her to have chosen a white man as husband.

Angelou was oppressed by her white husband, not physically but emotionally, which may not be usually considered to be a source of harassment in the social and domestic sphere. However, it is a serious problem known only to woman, not only in the United States but all over the world. For a woman emotional assault leads to physical ailment and never an effective mode of female oppression. Angelou too wished to escape from marital suppression. The broken marriage made her a saner person.
Angelou intended to marry Thomas who gave her an engagement ring and said they would marry in Virginia, his home state, in the church where his parents were married. Then they would visit Pensacola, Florida, because he always wanted to fish in the Gulf of Mexico. Everything was decided by him. He didn’t require her agreement and the decision to marry her automatically gave him authority to plan their future. Angelou got an uneasy twinge that warned her but she silently complied with the new demureness. Marriage offers a license to men both white and black to take black woman for an inferior creature and taken for granted that the black woman loses her identity and power. Angelou, by keeping quiet and accepting the male domination, allowed herself to be dictated and suppressed. Confused and unhappy, Angelou happened to meet the much manly male from Africa, Vusumizi Make. The African elements and strong sexuality emanated from him attracted Angelou, but, here too, the domineering male told her that he was taking her to Africa. When she mentioned about the marriage with Thomas, Make responded thus, “I owe it to our people to save you. When you see your bloody fiancé, tell him that I am after you and that with me every day is Saturday night and I’m black and I’m dangerous” (Heart 114).

The black mother in her thought of her son, Guy, who would get a chance to have an African father; the African spirit in her refused to betray her ancestors in Africa; the lover in her was hesitant to abuse Thomas but a beckoning life of adventure in Africa lured her to choose Make. Marriage, she soon found out, is a convenient affair for man, whether white or black. Life
after marriage for Angelou was equivalent to slaving. Make was a difficult and different husband. He had lots of money, the source of which she never knew. Though they were well-off, she had to toil to keep house. Her friend Abbey considered it as Make’s coaching to make her a true African woman. When Abbey said, “You’re not a man, no matter how strong you are” (Heart 143), Angelou understood the submissive condition of a woman especially an African woman. She had to do all the work at home and she was unemployed. She was angry and desperate because she was not allowed to go to work but at the same time had no say in the household matters which made her uncomfortably useless. Abbey comforted her, “… a man’s supposed to be in charge. That is the order of nature” (Heart 142). When she was raising an argument that had been debated for a long time Angelou replied, “Well then, I must be outside of nature. Because I can’t stand not knowing where our air is coming from” (Heart 143). Abbey believed that the worst injury of slavery was that the white man took away the black man’s chance to be in charge of himself, his wife and his family. But Angelou wanted to be a wife and to create a beautiful home to make her man happy: “But there was more to life than being a diligent maid with a permanent pussy” (Heart 143).

Infidelity was not discussed between Make and Angelou but she suspected that Make had other women in his life by discovering the stains of other women’s make up on his clothes. When questioned, Make was furious and shouted, “Do not question me again. You are my wife. That is all you need to know” (Heart 187). She was totally upset. Such treatment towards woman in
a patriarchal society proves her to be the big ‘other’ and is confined to her assigned place. It is also divinely ordained that women exist not for themselves but for men. Likewise, Make did not hide or refuse his relations with a whore and justified himself and said, “A man requires a certain amount of sexual gratification. Much more than a woman needs, wants or understands” (*Heart* 246). He said being an African he had the right to marry more than one woman. As he was unfaithful to her several times and there was a loss of love between them, Angelou wanted to leave him. According to the Egyptian custom, they had to face a common trial, palaver, and in the trial she had the opportunity to tell her heart out and he was the loser. She was allowed to leave him.

Make refused her chance to perform in public, saying that Americans did not know there is a world beyond theirs which indicates how he considered the black women in America as narrow and when she found a job as an ‘Associate Editor’ in the Arab Observer, Make could not hold himself. He emitted his venom, “Black and American, you think you can come to Egypt and just go get a job? That’s foolish. It shows the nerve of the black woman and the arrogance of the American… As my wife and as a foreigner you would never find a job” (*Heart* 225).

But when she confirmed her decision to work, he burst into a tirade. His male ego was hurt and he shouted, “You took a job without consulting me? Are you a man?” (*Heart* 225). She had to listen to the diatribe, his vilification, hinting at her insolence, defiance, callousness, cheekiness and lack of breeding.
An African husband steeped in tradition of male authority would react in this manner whenever his ego is hurt. He wanted her as an obedient wife. Make represents the black male world which suffers from inferiority complex and vents their anger on the hapless woman. Although she displeases her husband and takes up a job, she allows the male dominate in society. In the office when David DuBois introduced Maké as her husband to her colleagues, she stood outside their ceremony, “like a foundling on an orphanage door step” (Heart 229). She was presented later to the colleagues and thus David followed the established ritual of introducing the husband first and had dissipated the hostility before it could collect.

Angelou’s experiences with the white and black men were the same. Tosh, being White, perceived her not only as an inferior woman but also a Black. There is an ambivalent attitude in him. He liked black music and lived in the Negro neighbourhood but he did not like the black people, “I don’t like Italians or Jews or Irish or Orientals. I am Greek, and I don’t like them either” (Singing 26) was his attitude. He shared her love of Jazz music and English literature, but their marriage failed because he wrapped her in a cocoon of safety which was like a cage, a shield, a veil against reality. It had created a claustrophobic sensation in her. She had already suffered silence when she was physically violated by her step-father and then whenever she is abused emotionally or physically she could not react immediately as there was a psychological cloistering of her. It needed strong mental effect to come out of it and confront reality boldly.
4.3.2. Dalit Women

Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Bama’s writings. She criticizes the domestic violence and abuse of dalit women at home by Dalit men and sexual and occupational harassment faced by them outside their homes at the hands of the upper caste men and the police. In *Karukku*, she discusses oppression borne by Dalit women at the hands of state, Panchayat and further by Dalit men at home. The collision of patriarchy with caste hegemony causes a hasher and more unjust suppression of Dalit women. Through her writings, Bama unravels various phases of Dalit women’s life from birth to adulthood especially of the paraya community. Lakshmi Holmstrom in the introduction to the English translation of *Karukku* refers to the literary endeavor of Bama thus, “It grows out of a particular moment, a personal crisis and water-shed in the author’s life, which drives her to make sense of her life as woman, Christian Dalit” (*K 7*).

Thus *Karukku* was a reaction to the personal crisis Bama had undergone as a Christian Dalit woman. The discriminatory treatment that she faced because of her paraya background is the theme of *Karukku*. The personal experiences transcend and are extended to the communal. It is a collective biography of a people who have been structurally subordinated for centuries. By placing paraya women in the centre, Bama offers a different feminine view of the community, its experiences and its history. Violence in the life of the paraya women differs from the violence done to men of their community
because these women become the dalits of the dalit when ill treated by their
dalit husbands who are abused by the upper castes unjustly, violently and
arrogantly.

Her grandmother worked as a servant for Naicker families where even
the little ones called her by her name and ordered her about and her grand
mother like all other servants would call the boy respectfully “Ayya, master”
and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful for Bama to witness this
subordination. Even in the tender years, a boy learns to dominate a particular
caste, their gender. Suppression and discrimination is naturally imbibed by the
boy and the elder Dalit women endure this as if it is an ontological process.
Everyday she would go to the Naicker houses, sweeps out the cow shed, collect
the dung and dirt, and bring the left-over rice and curry from the previous day.
Bama remembers how she considered the stale food as nectar of the gods. It is
usually the women who managed the household and her mother and
grandmother did hard work when the father in the Army did not send money,
“It is my mother who manages to look after us, by picking up some coolie
work… on occasion we children would finish off whatever gruel or porridge
there was. Then it was my mother who had to go hungry” (K 62).

During school holidays, Bama helped her grand mother and mother at
the Naickers. Sometimes she went to pull out ground nuts from the field, and
clean it. She explains the experience:
If we were in a great hurry, we’d use both hands as well as our teeth to shell the ground nuts. If you used your teeth, your mouth would fill with dust and your throat would choke… at the same time we had to be careful not to crack the nuts. If too many of the nuts are broken the Naicker would be really angry. If we chatted in between shelling or ate one or two of the nuts, that was it. Naicker would be furious and swear at us, using every term of abuse he knew (K 43).

Bama was ready to do any job to help her mother, but what she could not digest was, “… even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I would never understand why” (K 47). The discrepancy in gender made them pay low and thereby exploit the strength and hard work of women. Oppression led even into the games children play. Girls were not allowed to play boy’s games like kabadi or marbles or chellaanguchi; if played they are roundly abused. The play by children referred to in Karukku is an instance to be reckoned with:

When school was over, we children joined together and played our games. We made no distinction between boys and girls. We played together… two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them ‘Ayya’, ‘Ayya’ and pretend to be their ‘pannaiyaal’. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They’d call us names, humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work. We’d pretend to work in the fields all day and then collect our
wages and go home. We also played at keeping shop. The boys managed the shops, pretending to be the Nadar Mudalaali (K 48).

The games of children continued, they play as being married - the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife; the police arriving and beating him up. As they grew older, the boys and the girls had different games. The patterns in which these children played alluded to the discriminatory system that prevailed in the society. Though unaware of the gender differences, the boys always took the role of the dominant Naicker and Nadar, or they became the Mudalaali and the girls were assigned subordinate roles like those of slaves or servants. If the boy enacted the role of a husband, he was sure to hit the girl who acted wife. This shows how the ideology of social system that is founded on caste, class and gender discrimination filters into the young minds of the children. In another sense, the play by children reveals the intermingling of caste, class and gender identities within Indian society.

If in *Karukku*, she describes the self; in *Sangati* and *Vanmam*, she describes the community itself. In these two works, she presents the Dalit women subjected to violence and injustice. The polyphonic voices in *Sangati*, narrating the incidents of their daily lives - sometimes rising in anger or in pain and lashing out at each other and against their oppressors - serve as indices of the oppressed society in India. *Sangati* examines the differences between women, their different needs, the different ways in which they are subjected to oppression and their coping strategies. In the opening chapter of *Sangati*, she...
mentions about the differences in treatment of boys and girls. Even though boys and girls were looked upon with no difference at birth; as they raise them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls. Boys are always preferred to girls in dalit homes. If a baby boy cries, he is immediately picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls, and boys are breast-fed longer than girls. When the children are a bit older, boys are respected better than girls. They are fed well, not burdened with household activities while girls stay home and keep working, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and carry the younger siblings, and take care of them when they play. Discrimination continues in labour where women are paid less, “Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price” (S 18). Unable to tolerate such discrimination, once, she asked her Paati why they treat boys and girls differently, “It’s you folk who put butter in one eye and quick lime in the other” (S 29). But they were not allowed to speak against men. To remain subservient to men is what has been injected into the minds of girls from the beginning, “From your ancestor time it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learned a few letters of the alphabet” (S 29). They believed that it is the boy who would look after them till the end and rearing a girl is only to give her away into another family.
4.3.3. Marriage and Machismo

Bama narrates in her works how marriage is often mistaken for authority by men. They consider their wives as their possession, and with this blotted egoistic notion the dalit men often terrorize their women and are unsympathetic towards them. In *Karukku*, a man nicknamed ‘Uudan’ meaning blower, dragged his wife by the hair to the community hall and beat her up with his belt as if she were an animal. He went into this marriage without his liking and hence the ill treatment to the innocent woman was justified. In *Sangati*, Paati sadly enumerates the story of her elder daughter who was married at a very young age to a brute who tortured her day and night. She had eight children and then she was suspected to be killed by her husband. When enquired why he killed her, she said, “Because the man was very crazy with lust ...he is an animal that fellow. When she refused he practically broke her in half” (*S* 10). When questioned, he would shout, “She is my wife. I can beat her or even kill her if I want” (10) and put this theory into practice. Similar injustice was encountered by Thaayi, another woman who was beaten by her husband with a belt and brutally chopped off a big chunk of hair and tied it to the door-post to crush her pride. The women generally become slaves from the very day they are married. The men keep them under their control and take away their freedom and this trap is too entangled to get away, once married. “Once you’ve put your head in a mortar, can you escape from the pestle?” (*S* 44), asks Patti. Bama exhibits a mixed feeling of anger, excitement, fury, resentment and hatred against this in her works.
Men are allowed to marry anyone and even outside their community or castes but marrying outside the caste is not accepted in the case of a girl. They would bring down the pride and honour of the whole community and hence they are not allowed to cross the line drawn by the community. Maikkanni’s father had taken a concubine and no one bothered about it and her mother’s health deteriorated due to bearing seven children. Though such injustice towards women were prevalent, no women was allowed to remain alone or unmarried. Bama writes, “They speak ill of her and want to put a bridle through her nose and see if everything doesn’t sort itself out” (S 20) which means that women are like cattle that need taming. And it is women themselves who often claim that “if we are to be kept in check, then men must put thalis round our necks” (S 120). Bama says that even if all women are slaves to men, dalit women really are the worst sufferers. They opt to be different from the women of other communities or castes because dalit women have to bear the torment of upper caste masters in the fields and at home they have to bear the violence of their husbands. Paati had given instructions not to go to certain places to collect fire wood because “…if upper caste fellows clap eyes on you, you are finished. They’ll drag you of and rape you, that’s for sure” (S 8). That untouchability does not apply to sexual exploitation is the paradox we witness.

Women are constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the workplaces. Bama brings afore many characters in Sangati who were victimized for being a woman. Mariamma was accused, abused and made a scapegoat because she escaped from the landlord’s efforts to molest her. It
shows that power rests with men, whether they are caste-courts or churches, and the rules regarding sex differ for men and women. The men had the freedom to have concubines or even to end the marriage and it is accepted as natural, “They say he is a man, if he sees mud he’ll step into it, if he sees water, he’ll wash himself. It’s one justice for men and quite another for women” (S 24).

Paati voices the fate of her folk, “if you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man” (S 6). The exploitation and violence lead to psychological stresses and strains which account for dalit women’s belief in their being possessed by evil spirits or ‘peys’. A deep investigation into the lives of the dalits tells Bama why the dalit women feel so. At home, they were pestered by their husbands or children, in the fields they worked hard besides the harassment of the landlord. When they return home after a hard labour, the men go about drinking and abusing their wives or children to give vent to their feeling of frustration and depression. The women who silently bare the burden at the domestic and social fronts feel overwhelmed and crushed by their own feelings of disgust, boredom and exhaustion. The mentally stronger women fight back physically and verbally against the dominant patriarchy to lease out their mental strain and survive everything, but the mentally feeble ones are totally oppressed: they succumb to mental depression and behave as if they are possessed by ‘peys’. Though an illiterate, Paati had a reply to the question about why the spirits possess women and not men, “How will it catch men?
They know how to be brave in their hearts. The peys only catch people who are scared. Its women who are always fearful cowards” (S 50).

Patriarchy works in an unjust manner that women are wage earners as much as men but men could spend their earnings as they please while women have to bear the burden of running the family. To make both ends meet, children often go for labour, like Mikkanni in Sangati who went to the match factory to help her mother whenever she was pregnant. Once her father way laid her and left her crying. She was required to work far harder than her years demanded and also behaved with a common sense far beyond her years. Girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood; before they grow up, they are burdened with the house work, taking care of the babies and going out to work for daily wages. Education is denied to girls by their fathers and they are destined to remain farm hands and drink only ‘kanchi’ to appease their hunger. Madathi remembers how the missionaries gathered the children to educate by offering slate, pencil and note books. But since they were too poor they could not continue with their studies and their fathers did not allow them to, otherwise she would have become a teacher. She is reminded of her friend Pakyam, who was excellent in Mathematics that even the teachers were surprised at her aptitude. Education was denied to the women and Bama foregrounds a social system that targets dalit women most unjustly. All possible avenues of progress are closed to them. She brings out the complex, multilayered profile of dalit women’s oppression by showing how the paraya
men were violent, abusive and unjust toward their womenfolk as the upper caste landlords were towards the dalit community.

Unlike the black women, dalit women suffer from a different order of oppression, i.e., untouchability. The dalits cannot touch the upper caste or they were not allowed into the households of them. The whites refuse to sit near a black but an Indian untouchable is much more pungent because the very shadow of a dalit would make the others polluted. The dalits subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. It is believed to be eternal and unalterable. But dalits especially dalit women are no longer prepared to be silent occupants of the liminal space to which they had been confined for centuries by the men - both upper caste and dalit.

### 4.4. Religious Oppression

Blacks and dalit women are exposed to social and religious oppression but the religious oppression they confront is cruel and unholy. Angelou and Bama express their religious experiences in their writings. While Bama reveals the double standard of the church and about the nunneries which become the symbols of oppression, Angelou reflects on her skeptical beliefs and doubts that render her a mental torture. However church was a challenge for them both.

Southern Blacks gave all the credit to God for whatever meager pleasure they enjoyed. Angelou noted that they did not blame Him for their many misfortunes. She had grown up as a member of Methodist Episcopal Church
where her uncle was superintendent of Sunday school and her grand mother was Mother of the Church. Raised by her grand mother from the age of 3 to 13, Angelou went regularly to church meetings in the South. And she found her strongly devoted grand mother beginning each morning with the traditional prayer of thanks and supplication, one often heard in Black-American churches. To her, God was a real and personal friend. In the spirit of many Black-Americans of her time, her understanding of Biblical teachings has persuaded her that blacks are God’s chosen vessels that He’ll punish those who torment His people. As God protected the Jews from Pharaoh, she believes that God, in His own time and in His own way, will protect and deliver Black people whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction and consider that it was only by divine interventions that they were able to live at all. Angelou thought them all hateful because after the weary day’s work, when they assemble for the revival meeting, “The idea came to me that my people may be a race of Masochists and that not only was it our fate to live the poorest, roughest life but that we liked it like that” (Cage 102).

Her Momma believed that going to a revival meeting was like feeding the soul just like feeding the body. The revival meetings generated doubts in her as she was confused by worshiping God in a tent with the dirt floor. It appeared blasphemous. She wondered, “Would God the Father allow His only Son to mix with this crowd of cotton pickers and maids, washermen and handy men?” (Cage 103). There is a soulful struggle in the child Angelou with the worth of herself and her people in God’s eyes. She found the believers praying
loudly and screaming, who were assured that if they bore up the life of toil and cares, a blessed home awaited them in the far off time. Their service was akin to the African ritual, an authentic release, when the preacher said, “Charity don’t say, ‘because I give you a job, you got to bend your knee to me’. It doesn’t say, ‘because I pays you what you due, you got to call me master” (Cage 107). The congregation knew whom he was talking about and voiced agreement with his analysis. They were refreshed with the hope of revenge and the promise of justice.

4.4.1 Church and Challenges

Momma taught Bailey and Angelou to rely on the promises of a just God, to avoid contact with whites where possible and to follow the paths of life that she and her generation had found to be safe ones. She also taught them to respect piety and those customary laws that governed all areas of a ‘good’ child’s life and behaviour. According to their rigid code, cleanliness is next to godliness, dirtiness the inventor of misery. An impudent child is not only detested by God and a shame to his parents but will also bring destruction to his house and life. Through the purity of her life and the quality of her discipline, Momma demonstrated that by centering one’s being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world. Angelou internalized these silent lessons. Being imposed upon by these dictations, both Bailey and Angelou created a sense of imprisonment within them. They were closed in by the Holy Order. She explains how they spent their days until thirteen and left Arkansas:
Each Sunday I spent a minimum of 6 hours in church. Monday evenings Momma took me to Usher Board Meeting; Tuesdays the Mother’s of the church meet; Wednesdays was for prayer meetings; Thursdays, the Deacons congregated; Fridays and Saturdays were spent in preparation for Sunday (Gather 16).

When she became a mother and explained this to her son, he asked if there was a God and to whom she had been praying all her life which literally disintegrated her. Probably inspired by rigorous religious pressures her favourite book in the Bible became Deuteronomy:

The laws where so absolute so clearly set down that I knew if a person truly wanted to avoid hell and brimstone, and being roasted for ever in the devils’ fire, all she had to do was memorize Deuteronomy and follow its teaching, word for word. I also like the way the word rolled off the tongue (Cage 31).

They were always kept under the vigil of Momma in the church that they could neither laugh nor talk. In such a situation, they could only but admire a humourless taciturn man, a Negro - Mr. Mc Elroy, who never went to church. “How great it would be to grow up like that to be able to stare religion down especially living next door to a woman like Momma,” (Cage 16) she thought.

The blacks always reassured themselves that although they might be the lowest of the low they were at least not uncharitable as they had been taught in make-shift churches. They expected that “… in the great ‘Getting up Morning’
(Last Judgements day), Jesus was going to separate the sheep (Blacks) from the goats (Whites)” (Cage 107). When Freeman was punished by Angelou’s uncles for the violence he did to her, the guilt ridden Angelou believed that she had forfeited her place in heaven for ever. She suspected, “Even Christ Himself turned His back on Satan, wouldn’t He turn His back on me?” (Cage 72). The thought spiritually unnerved her and she lapsed into a long silence. She suffered from such guilt as a seventeen year old mother because she knew that “… according to the Book, bastards were not to be allowed into the congregation of the righteous” (Gather 6). When she decided to confront life instead of surrendering in defeat, she took any job that came her way - like a Creole cook, prostitute or night club dancer. While at the peak of her illicit business, she joined the church and tried to sing in the choir with great feeling but it did nothing for her soul.

Louise Cox, the owner of the store in which Angelou worked, was white and a practising Christian Scientist. Accepting her invitation, she visited their church and found to her amazement that there was no stamping of feet or clapping of hands while worshiping. The interior’s severity, the mass of quiet, well dressed whites and the lack of emotion unsettled her:

I took particular notice of the few blacks in the congregation. They appeared as soberly affluent and emotionally reserved as their fellow white parishioners. I had known churches to be temples where one made a joyful noise unto the Lord (Singing 18).
When Louise continued to encourage her towards Christian Science, she was unwilling to immerse herself in its depth because Christian Science was an intellectual religion and the God its members worshipped seemed to her, “…all broth and no bones” (*Singing* 22). The God of her childhood was an old, white, Vandyke bearded Father Time who roared up thunder, then puffed out His cheeks and blew down Hurricanes on His errant children. He would be placated only if one fell prostrate, groveled and begged for mercy. I didn’t like that God, but He did seem more real than a Maker who was just thought and spirit. I wished for a someone in between (*Singing* 22).

Angelou felt she was interested in Judaism because for hundreds of years the Black-American slaves had seen parallels between their oppression and that of the Jews in Biblical times. The Hebrew children in the fiery furnace elicited constant sympathy from the black community because their American experience mirrored their ancient tribulation. Hence Angelou decided to meet a Rabbi to know more about Judaism. The erudite Rabbi fired many questions at her which she was unable to defend and answered, “I like the praying, but I don’t like the idea of a God so frightening that I’d be afraid to meet Him” (*Singing* 25).

For the question why her God frightened her, she was unable to reveal that “…when my minister threatened fire and brimstone, I could smell my flesh frying…I told him a less personal truth. Because I am afraid to die”
(Singing 25). Rabbi only told her that Judaism will not save her from death and gave a list of books to read. Her growing scepticism made her question black community’s faith norms and found it difficult to accept the fatalism that accompanied the religious belief. So she lost interest in Judaism.

Angelou lost her freedom to worship when she married Tosh. He being an atheist told her son that there was no God. She contradicted him but could not prove the presence of God. The restriction made her visit the neighbourhood church secretly. After watching the multi coloured people in church dressed in their gay Sunday finery and praising their Maker with loud voices and sensual movements, Tosh and their house looked very pale and unholy. She felt cleansed, purged and new.

Malcolm X happened to deliver a speech in New York and the black community thronged to hear him. He blamed the white man and his white religion. He claimed them guilty and called them hypocrites. Portuguese Catholic priests had sprinkled holy water on slave ships, entreating God to give safe passage to the crews and cargos on journeys across the Atlantic. American slave owners had misinterpreted the Bible to prove that God wanted slavery and that Jesus Christ had admonished slaves to “… render unto their master obedience” (Heart 168). He continued to stress the point that as long as the black man looked to the white man’s God for his freedom, the black man would remain enslaved. He offered them the religion of Islam, of the Prophet Muhammed and the Honorable Elijah Muhammed. Angelou and others were
disappointed and confused. There was defeat and despair in air because there was no one to fight for their real emancipation, which also included emancipation of the spirit.

Angelou reverted to her faith and belief as Christian. She believed that the blacks practised the teachings of Christ, to turn other cheek so often and to forgive as Jesus said seven times seventy, “We forgave as if forgiving was our talent” (Heart 173). Their church music showed that there was something greater than that and something beyond their physical selves. God and His son Jesus were always present and they could sing the angels out of heaven.

4.4.2. Cruel Church

The black African-Americans after the internalization adapted the white man’s culture, language and religion. Though this caused a change for a new factor, the conversion helped them have a foothold and stay poised in the post-colonial America. But the religious atmosphere in India is totally different. Christianity does not recognize caste divisions, but church in India is castiest in its dealings. Bama depicts how Dalit Christians were treated in our country through her novels. Church becomes partial and supports and encourages the upper class and upper castes while it denounces the lower classes and lower castes and thereby it refrains from its true duty. Some of the Dalit communities like Parayas have converted to Christianity only to escape from casteist oppression which had greatly disillusioned them as they were unable to tolerate the oppression, humiliation and disrespect. Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing
in the church choirs, are forced to sit separately away from the upper caste Christians, are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village or behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. Further, reservation benefits are not granted to Dalit Christians as theoretically Christianity does not recognize caste. The Government reservation policy fails to take into account the gap between belief and practice and Dalit Christian faced the brunt of it.

Bama’s works depict how church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and instead preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful while suppressing the radical, liberative teachings of Jesus. Bama learnt devotion to God from her mother, Paati, her teachers and the nuns. She attended the catechism classes every evening at church. When she was in the primary school run by nuns, the sisters entrusted her to lock up and open the Parish church every day. When she was alone in the church, she was frightened on remembering the stories narrated by the sisters related to the devil. They had warned that if they went on committing sins the devil would note them down in a notebook and when the book got filled up he would peal the skin off their backs and write there. The nuns never seemed to tell them any cheerful story. She was often stupefied with terror imagining the devil with the balance to weigh the sins and merits. After her First Communion she was taught to make confessions. The dalit students were taught the same text which they repeated:

I praise the Lord Omnipotent. Bless me Saami, for I’ve sinned. It is a week since I made my last confession. I lied four times, I stole
five times, I have not obeyed my elders, I was day dreaming in church; I repent these and those sins that I’ve forgotten, Saami (K 72).

The priest would prescribe three Hail Marys as punishment and give a blessing. They would run to the church to repeat the prayers, end with an act of contrition, and run home only to come the following week to repeat the same.

When they received the Host at communion they were threatened not to touch or bite it. But Bama secretly found it to be false. The catechism classes on Sunday evenings were always a nightmare for the little Bama. She could recite the litany well and learnt all the prayers but if she or other children happened to sleep they were beaten or pinched by the nuns to keep them awake. Bama remembers how once when she was repeating the prayers, the sister turned up suddenly and Bama was so startled and nervous that she made a mistake in a line that she was saying aloud. The sister knocked on her forehead so severely that it began to swell up. But she continued the prayer weeping with pain. This incident made her decide, “I would never attend a catechism class or go to church service ever again. My anger abated a little with this thought” (K 75). The notion of the church as a place where supernatural fears are overcome is nearly subverted here and the blame is on the clergy who work through ‘fear’ rather than love and understanding. This ‘teaching by fear’ continued throughout the childhood of Bama. She openly confesses in Karukku about her religious beliefs, “When I look back upon all
these years that have gone by, I realize that the Bhakti and belief I had in God has changed in a curious way. I am myself surprised at this” (K 70). Her writings illustrate the strong indictment of the ways and means used by the church to educate its dalit flock in matters of religion, forgetting all the compassion and love which is the central focus of the teachings of the religion and focusing instead on terror and fear.

In its initial stages of existence in colonial India, the church offered security to a large number of untouchables from the degradation of caste, while materially aiding them in times of famine. But the supportive attitude of the church happens to be contradicting its description in Karukku. At the time of the strife between the paraya and chaaliyar community, the priest far from helping the paraya community or interceding on their behalf with the police, informs the police about the strategies of the wronged Parayas and got some of them arrested too. The priest had also not helped the people to file a case. Bama comments:

When our men who were hiding in the church were caught and taken away, this priest was sitting at ease in his bungalow, his legs crossed, smoking his cigarette happily and watching it all. We asked the priest for a peltry loan of a few rupees, but he absolutely refused (K 38).

Dalit women and children were treated callously in the church. Bama describes in Karukku how when a little boy pissed in the church a nun gave the little one
four sharp blows that made the child scream and the mother of the child who was so offended and disappointed with the behaviour of the nun yelled, “… its New Year’s day and he is only a baby, should you hit him as if he has committed some kind of heinous sin?” (K 56). It was customary for the entire congregation to go, family by family, to the Mother Superior or to the priest carrying gifts of fruits or biscuits. Bama recollects how the poor Dalits were exploited by the clergy:

Even though our people had never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow went through every effort to buy the fruit for the church elders; they made their offerings, knelt before them in all humility and received the sign of the cross on their foreheads (K 56).

In Sangati also she describes how the poor peasants take their offerings to the priest during the Sunday Service. They take grains and pulses depending on the season, “Paddy, maize, millet, pulses, sesame seeds or beans or whatever was growing in the fields - are carried to the priest, gave it to him and received his blessings” (S 34). The priest in return for the gift would give holy pictures. When one woman lamented that she did not get a picture or a calendar, the priest retorted, “Have you given me some money in order to buy you holy pictures? You may all go home quickly without leaning on the walls or touching anything” (K 57).
It was an injunction not to defile the church by touch. The dalit women complain angrily that it is the duty of the women to sweep the church and keep it clean and the women from other castes stand to one side until it is over and then march in to sit down leaving these Dalit women standing. When queried about it, the sister explained, “We gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially. See how they fool us in the name of God! Why, don’t those people need God’s blessings too?” (S 119).

The mercenary nature of the clergy becomes evident in the policies adopted in their institutions of ‘charity’. The ubiquitous nature of caste has infiltrated even into the space of religious institutions, thereby giving up its potential for social change which affects those people whose initial attraction to Christianity was the liberation it promised from caste distinctions.

4.4.3. Oppressed Dalit Nun

The critique of practice in Catholic Christianity occurs in Karukku at two levels. One is from the point of view of a young girl belonging to the religion and other from the vantage point of a dalit woman. Both are inter-related in that as a young girl she is ‘taught’ the religion by the clergy that she later joins, in the hope of using the church as a platform, for social work. However, as an adult when she recounts the childhood experiences it shows certain insensitivity to children’s feelings which marked the clergy. As a Christian Dalit, she is more interested in deconstructing the Catholic Christian order about which she has had a first hand experience. She is very hard at the
Christian missionaries, not the visiting foreign missionaries but their colonial cousins, the caste conscious nuns and monks. She accounts the discriminatory attitude of the nuns at the convent, “Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty” (K 66).

God may be impartial to the humans on earth, but God’s servants, though they pose themselves as saved from the blood of Christ and take a vow for devoted selfless service to the poorest of the poor, are in reality not able to come out of their caste consciousness and their predilection for luxury. There was always an abundance, comfortable living and conveniences at the nunnery which made her think, “Chi, is this all there is to the life of renunciation? Is there an understanding of poverty here?” (K 66). The thought disturbed her which later grew into frustration. As an inmate of the nunnery, she could not find God within its four walls and sadly enough with in the four walls of the church too. The sisters of Christ in the Convent did not even care to glance at poor children and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. Bama felt sad to write, “In that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way” (K 66).

Though the Dalits outnumber all others in church membership, it is sad to note that only higher caste Christians enjoy all the benefits, as Bama says:
It is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority and throw their weight about. And if dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business (K 69).

In short, dalits have no space for renunciation in the church. Unable to continue in such a vitiated atmosphere, Bama left the convent “utterly weary and dispirited” (K 67). She enumerates her bitter experiences in the Convent in *Karukku*. The actual life led by the nuns and the purpose of their calling has absolutely no correlation. She remembers how she was appointed in a convent where all children came from wealthy families. The convent too was a well endowed one, as if “… the Jesus they worshipped was a wealthy Jesus” (K 91).

There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. Though they declared that God loves, there was no love to be found in the convent. There was much confusion in her mind about the place of belief and devotion. There seemed to be one God within the church and another outside. She was extremely bewildered by the different versions of God. In her sojourn with them, she also understood the lack of humanity in their piety. They spoke in an empty way of devotion, renunciation, the Holy Spirit, God’s vocation, poverty, charity and obedience. She wonders if the inmates had become “… so habituated to their play-acting that they no longer distinguish between the role and the reality” (K 92). She believes that the few assume power, control the dispossessed and the poor by thrusting a blind belief and devotion upon them and by turning them into slaves in the name of God, while they themselves live
in comfort. The powerful clergy actually discriminate and ignore the poor who struggle for their space in the society:

They teach them to shut their eyes when they pray with the deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall. What kind of piety can this be? They make themselves into Gods so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone? (K 93).

Bama’s conscience was battered and bruised and life became meaningless for her. All these profound thoughts created an anguish that forced her to leave the convent.

When the church conveniently forgets the duty towards its oppressed class, they in turn also lose faith in the church and respect to the priest. This is reflected in the writings of Bama when she describes such an experience in Vanmam, where the church and the priest remained silent and inactive whenever the oppressed dalits needed them. When a communal strife broke out in the village, the elders and youngsters gathered to ease the tension. When Jayarasu opined that they should meet the priest, discuss the matter and take a decision with his help, instantly Antony got up and shouted, “We can’t accept this idea. Is he a priest? Where was he all these days? Does he participate in
any of the functions in our street both good and bad? So it is a waste to call them” \((V 87)\). The others agreed:

Yes, the priest would say ‘what he had done is a sin, so let him get the beatings as a punishment of his sins and quietly skip out of the situation. Whatever it is, he is one from upper caste. If he is of our caste he would understand our difficulties, our loss, and our feelings \((V 87)\).

They also remembered that when there was a riot in the street it was this priest who ran away first. The adverse comment on the silent church and its non interference in the matters of dalit strife is highlighted in the novel.

Bama notifies that priests also show casteist discrimination. In *Vannam* she describes the activity of a particular Nadar priest who supported his caste and showed indifference to the dalit believers of his parish. The priest had hung the photograph of Kamaraj in the monastery, which is against the holy order. The dalit youth questioned the partial attitude and demanded him to keep Ambedkar’s picture too. When the dalit youth asked him to keep the pictures of “Pope and the Lord as usual” \((V 72)\), immediately, he refused and created an issue in the village. The Nadar community was instigated and came to support the priest. The dalit youths were adamant in not allowing the picture of Kamaraj to be hung unless Dr. Ambedkar’s picture was also hung. The matter became serious and reached the Bishop who immediately gave orders to
transfer the priest elsewhere so that peace could reside between the Nadars and the dalits.

In the intra-dalit strife between the Pallars and the Parayas, the Paraya community became the victims at the social and religious levels. The police and the church become merciless towards the Dalit community and oppressed them instead of establishing peace between the two warring communities. The women who suffered in the lock up lamented, “When heard of the riot, our priest went under hiding. So let us go to the neighbourhood priest to discuss the matter and get advice” (V 104).

If the Church remained callous to the communal problems of the dalits, it remained cruel in the case of marriage for women. Inter-caste marriages are allowed to men but a girl or rather a dalit would never marry outside her caste. Though the church preaches that inter-caste marriages are commendable, the priest himself sometimes blocks such marriages. An instance in Sangati focuses on how a priest deals with the situation when a Paraya girl fell in love with the Pallar boy. The girl found it difficult to get a permission letter from her Parish priest to marry in a church in a different Parish. Moreover she also faced a threat to her job since she was working in a school run by Christian priests. However the girl had no choice but to ask the priest for a permission letter.

The parish priest listened to the girl’s story and then went and broadcasted it to all and sundry, humiliating her and holding her up
to ridicule. He spoke about her as if she had been behaving like a whore, cast suspicion on her morals, met her in a room all alone and leered at her, made false promises to her and kept her running between the church and her home like a dog; but he never organized a wedding or anything for her (S 108).

The treacherous character of the priest is drawn by Bama thus. The closed nature of the Church in all its dealings repelled her and made her wonder why they had converted to Christianity after all. Bama in an interview commented on the coldness of the church, “The church’s nature is to be silent. It is a silent church. May be it is for the upper class people that they might have come, but not for dalits” (Interview Personal). The oppressive nature of the church generates fear and frustration in the minds of the dalits. The church fails to instill confidence and comfort in them. Dalit women were disturbed by the social untouchability, economic derision and lack of religious support and they become psychologically abnormal and believe in possession of ‘peys’ or spirits. Bama in Sangati captures the fear and beliefs of the women of the lower castes like the Paraya, Pallar or Vannaan communities who believed that people who died unnaturally wander as ‘peys’: Virayi, a Vannaan woman, was possessed by Esakki (S 48); Manacchi, a Paraichi, was possessed by the ghost of Muukayya Chattier’s wife (S 45). The villagers also believed in a wandering troupe of Ayyankaachi ghost (S 54). The uneducated dalits also believe in “a fire breathing ‘Pisaasu’ that lived in the branches of banyan keeping guard over seven cauldrons of coins” (K 36). The position of the women, especially of the
oppressed class, is very precarious both outside and within the church; outside they have to be wary of the upper caste men’s exploitation and within the church the priest or the believers render little help to relieve their sufferings.

The church does nothing to eliminate superstitious beliefs, nor does it instruct the poor dalits how to lead a fearless and peaceful life. Both the blacks and dalits have such commonalities in their experiences. Bama vehemently attacks the church for its castiest segregation of the dalits. The plight of the Christian dalits is so tragic and deplorable that she grows suspicious about her community’s conversion to Christianity.

4.5. Conclusion: Unheard Voice

The works of Angelou and Bama have unravelled the different forms of oppressions directed at different levels. Oppression in their narratives accentuates the discriminative emotions which are channeled through high thoughts about religion and society. Malcolm X concludes in the last chapter of his autobiography, “Can sincere white people and sincere black people show a road to the salvation of America’s very soul” (Haley 377). The implication of Malcolm’s word is that only authentic black and white people have a chance to become sincerely, socially redemptive. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his autobiography ‘Akkarmashi’ comments, “It generates a guilty conscience in the Savarna reader and not only guilt, but also conviction that injustice and excesses that have been committed against dalits must not continue” (Limbale 126).
The dalit autobiographies and literary writings for that matter generate dual responses - they confront the dalits with the degrading life they lead and make them realise that they should unite to fight and they remind dalits about the oppression and exploitation meted to the dalits.

Maya Angelou and Bama, through their representative writings, address the issues of oppression and alienation experienced by marginalized groups in the religio-socio-economic contexts of their nations. Being women with first hand experience of gender discrimination within and outside their communities, their works authenticate their reactions to oppression of all kinds, thus transcending topographical boundaries in gender discourses.

Notes

1 Primitive Communism: It refers to collective right to basic resources, egalitarianism in social relationships and absence of authoritarian rule and hierarchy that is supposed to have preceded stratification and exploitation in human history. Both Marx and Engels were heavily influenced by Morgan’s speculative history which describes “liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gents.”

2 July Fourth: On this day in 1776, White America declared itself free and independent from the Great Britain. But slavery was officially abolished in New York State on Fourth July 1827 only.

3 Psychological Paralysis: Any person because of constant and severe violence becomes depressed and unable to take any independent action that would allow him or her to escape the abuse. Sufferers have low-esteem and often believe that abuse is their fault and seek comfort from the abuser.
Neurotic Orientation: Fanon describes it as an inferiority complex exhibited by the Black man and superiority complex exhibited by the White man.

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